

KUNUNURRA, AIR SERVICE CRISIS

**1304. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Local Government and Regional Development; the Kimberley, Pilbara and Gascoyne:**

I refer to the air service crisis facing Kununurra, whereby the Darwin airline, Airnorth, is providing a valuable but limited air service to the east Kimberley.

- (1) Is the minister aware that agricultural and horticultural produce is no longer able to be flown from Kununurra due to the limitations of the airport and the small planes that can land there?
- (2) Is the minister aware that the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley requires \$3 million to extend its airstrip to allow larger jet planes to land and to provide a valuable tourist and business service to the east Kimberley; and, if so, what steps will the minister take to assist the shire with its airport plans?

**Hon TOM STEPHENS replied:**

I appreciate the notice of the question. I have made arrangements for the member's question to be forwarded to the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, whose department provides the primary policy advice to government on air transport issues. The advice that is in front of me is as follows -

- (1) I have not been advised that the Kununurra airport is creating limitations that are having an impact on the shipment of horticultural or agricultural produce from the east Kimberley.

Hon Murray Criddle: You should ask the shire.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I thank the member for that. I have been in recent contact with the shire council. This issue has not been raised with me.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: Did you include that in the letter you sent to the council?

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! Many members are waiting to ask questions. The minister has now lost his place in the answer. See what the member has done.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I would normally have expected to be told if an issue such as this was of concern. Is the member saying that the council has contacted him on this issue?

Hon Murray Criddle: Yes. You ask the council. The shire is in your part of the world.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I have a very good relationship with that council, and I am a little surprised to receive the information in the way that I am in the House and to be told that the suggestion came from the council. However, that is okay. I will take the opportunity to check with the council. We have not had any direct advice of this - certainly none that has been drawn to my attention. I am working very closely with the development commission specifically on the issue of air services. The development commission asked the shire president, Barbara Johnson, to join with the working group on this issue of restoring air services to a satisfactory level for people in the east Kimberley.

- (2) There has been some recent discussion with the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley, which is the owner of the Kununurra airport, about its early-stage consideration of expanding the Kununurra runway so that it will be suitable for Boeing 737 aircraft. I understand that the issue of the land that is necessary as a precondition for that expansion has been resolved, so that the council now has the opportunity to extend the airport, if it so chooses. However, the question is whether a Boeing 737 operator is prepared to operate into that area. The member will appreciate that that is a much bigger question, because we do not yet have on offer an aviation outfit that is prepared to put an aircraft of that size back into that part of the east Kimberley on a regular baggage transport route. However, one would have thought that there will be opportunities to work through that situation. Specifically, the State will be able to draw on the skills of a consultancy following the letting of a contract by the Department for Planning and Infrastructure. That will ensure that policy advice on aviation is available to the Government of Western Australia in the next three months. We will work with the various players to ensure that that advice positions us with the capacity to seek -

Hon Murray Criddle: Just ask Nick Balyea and Drew Gaynor. They are the people to ask, and they are available to deal with that sort of thing. You don't need a committee; you just need to make a decision.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Regrettably, the aviation advice that the Government inherited needed to be strengthened. We are strengthening that in the manner in which we previously advised and about which I just told the member. We want to have available to us the best possible aviation advice to assist and guide us through the policy decisions. Of course, the question of the way in which the resource sector flies its work force into the east Kimberley must be included in the equation to ascertain whether there can be a triangulation of a

route to a couple of destinations in the east Kimberley with some other port, which would make it possible to have a Boeing 737 service or a larger service than is currently on offer. Having said that, I point out to the people of the east Kimberley that the aviation world, internationally and domestically, has changed. Although the services of an operation such as Airnorth are imperfect and less adequate than those previously on offer in this State, they are nonetheless better than no service. Airnorth, under Michael Bridge, is doing an enormous amount to try to guarantee that the people of the East Kimberley are linked into an aviation service that meets some of the current expectations of that community. We can all do better, and Airnorth will be the first to say that it will be delighted to work in partnership with any other aviation company that can deliver increased capacity when that capacity demand presents.